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## AN ATTEMPT TO DEFINE SOCIALISM

JOHN MARTIN

Definitions of socialism are almost as numerous as the combatants for and against socialism. Unbelievers claim the same right as believers to define the term, as Mark Twain said people should spell according to the dictates of their own conscience. The results are confusion and misunderstanding, muddy thinking and a woeful working at cross purposes in matters of national importance. So bewildering is the babel of voices that some people deny that socialism can be defined at all.

Preparatory to this symposium I inquired the opinion of some leading economists and publicists upon the meaning of the term and among the replies are the following:

Professor John H. Gray says: "You seem to have tackled a phantom, a will-o'-the-wisp. The term has no fixed or well-defined meaning. In the eyes of the interests socialism means any proposition to take away any power, legal or illegal, good or bad, that the interests now suppose themselves to possess."

Professor Davis R. Dewey writes: "It has never seemed to me possible to define the word so as to make it serviceable for general discussion. Socialism represents a movement. I do not see that it admits of sharper definition than Christianity, or barbarism, or culture.....The discussion has gone too far and the term is too widespread to bring down to any definition."

Professor Simon Patten declares, "I cannot define socialism. It seems to me to be a composite of several thought movements, each of which has separate causes."

However, I am glad to report that this despair and bafflement are not universal—not even characteristic. The great majority of those I have asked, all of them qualified to speak with authority, not only give a definition, but their definitions come remarkably close together. They show little of those wide variations as to the meaning of the term which distinguish the speeches of politicians on the stump and propagandists on the rampage.

The briefest is by Professor T. N. Carver, to whom "Socialism is the public ownership and operation of all the means of production." This is closely allied with the definition given by Mr. Wm. Jennings Bryan in an essay of which his secretary kindly

sends me a copy as answer to my inquiry. "Socialism", writes Mr. Bryan, "is the collective ownership, through the state, of all the means of production and distribution." If Mr. Bryan's ownership be taken to include management, as other sentences in his essays indicate it does, and if Professor Carver considers that distribution is, as an economic process, only a stage of production, then Harvard and Nebraska are practically in agreement.

Professor Henry R. Seager elaborates this a little. "Socialism", he says, "is a proposed reorganization of industrial society which would substitute for the private ownership of land and the instruments of production public ownership, and for the private direction and management of industry, direction and management through public officials."

Notice that this definition does not specify that all the means of production be owned by the public. Similarly, Professor Carl E. Parry stipulates, "the common ownership and operation of substantially all productive instruments." The same point is made by a thoughtful advocate of socialism, Mr. W. J. Ghent, whose definition runs as follows: "Socialism is the collective ownership and democratic management of the social means of production for the common good." "Not ALL the means", he continues, "for it is entirely probable that many of the smaller industries may justly, and with due regard for social efficiency, be left in private hands."<sup>1</sup>

Professor Richard T. Ely, in a definition originally given in his work "Socialism and Social Reform"—a definition which he tells me he would not change today—adds another idea. "Socialism", he says, "is that contemplated system of society which proposes the abolition of private property in the great material instruments of production, and the substitution therefor of collective property; and advocates the collective management of production, together with the distribution of social income by society, and private property in the larger proportion of this social income."

Probably the definitions before quoted may be taken to imply the idea fully expressed in the last clause of Mr. Ely's definition, that socialism contemplates private property in the larger proportion of social income. Others reach the same goal by considering the proposals of socialism with regard to the institution of property as fundamental. Professor David Kinley considers that socialism "in essence calls for a new law of property, to the

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<sup>1</sup> W. J. Ghent, *Socialism and Success*, p. 217.

extent of taking from individuals and giving to society as a group all property rights in land and the instruments of production"; and Professor J. W. Crook writes that "the term socialism might wisely be confined to that plan of social or economic reform which would eliminate profits and interest by doing away with the institution of private property in productive wealth and substituting therefor public ownership of the means of production."

These definitions are more exact than an analagous definition enunciated by President Taft in a speech delivered at the Ohio Northern University, an extract from which his secretary kindly sent me as authoritative. "Speaking generally", said the President, "of the issues which are likely to be presented to you students in the future, I think the issue of most importance will be the question of the preservation of our institution of private property, or its destruction, and the substitution of a certain kind of coöperative enjoyment of everything, which is the ideal of socialism."

You will notice that the President does not confine the proposed joint enjoyment to the means of production. He appears to hold that socialism would preclude the private ownership of any part of that social income which Professor Ely expressly stipulates will "in the larger proportion be held as private property."

It would be too tedious to quote other definitions to similar effect.

From all the definitions submitted there are significant omissions. Not a single person even mentions free love or the disruption of the family as having any relation to socialism. I may say, however, in this connection, that Colonel Roosevelt did not reply to my inquiry.

Further, no mention is made of the doctrine of the class war, nor of the materialistic conception of history, except that Professor Wenley refers to the latter as the basis of the desire "to vest all sources of wealth in the central government."

To sum up, the great majority of my correspondents agree that the definition of socialism must include the following points:

1. Public ownership of nearly all the means of production.
2. Operation of these means of production by public officials.
3. Distribution of the income according to rules determined by the community.
4. Private ownership of the income so distributed.

It is noteworthy that these points are included in the definition officially adopted by the National Executive Committee of the Socialist party of America, which runs: "Socialism is the modern movement of the working class to abolish the private ownership in the social means of production and distribution, and to substitute for it a system of industry, collectively owned and democratically managed for the benefit of the whole people."

Notice that the Socialist party adds, however, an idea which is not mentioned by any economist I have consulted. The party executive says that socialism is the modern movement of the working class to secure what I have just defined as socialism. To them the movement and its working-class character are essential. A party formed to advance any cause is, perhaps, of necessity, as much concerned about tactics, strategy, discipline, and passwords as about the soundness of its philosophy or the practicality of its aim. The Socialist party of America, the lineage of which is more clearly German than English, attaches importance to the materialistic interpretation of history and to the doctrine of the class war as, jointly, both indicating and justifying the only method by which, they say, socialism can be installed, namely, by the organization of those persons who do not possess property into a political party which, acting independently of all other parties, will have as its sole aim the establishment of socialism. Their belief is that persons possessing property will inevitably, with exceptions so few as to be negligible, by their material interests be led to oppose socialism; while the non-possessors, also with only few and negligible exceptions, must ultimately, when they understand the case, become class-conscious and approve socialism. This is not the time to discuss the validity of those beliefs, nor the correctness of that simple division of society into two classes.

I must point out, however, that this major doctrine of the Socialist political party in America—a doctrine to which applicants for party membership are usually asked to subscribe—has no place in any of the definitions of socialism which I have received. If we accept the definition which I have previously analyzed, a person might legitimately be classed as a socialist and yet not be a member of the Socialist party, exactly as a person may be a Christian without joining a church, or a Democrat or a Republican without enrolling as a member of the Democratic or Republican party.

Though the labels democratic and republican have been appropriated by political parties, yet democracy and republicanism remain independent of party platforms, contortions, or evasions, and debatable as methods of political or social organization irrespective of the ballot cast by the disputants at elections. A student contrasting American with English or German government might proclaim himself a Republican though he voted for Mr. Bryan; and, speaking of Russian society, he might proudly assert he was a Democrat, though he voted for Mr. Taft. In neither case would it occur to his party to object. Similarly, it is quite conceivable that "Socialist", as a party badge, may come to have little or no relation to socialism as a form of social and industrial organization—the strength and weakness, the drawbacks and advantages, of which may be discussed without any reference to the way a man votes.

Theoretically that divorce between party label and abstract doctrine is already clear; but, practically, while a party is young and struggling for power, and while it is filled with a fervor almost religious, it finds it impossible to display that broad toleration which would permit profane lips to employ its sacred phrases, or unsanctified persons to preach its pure doctrine. Socialism possesses a literature, a tradition, a status abroad, and the dignity of being a world movement, the glory of which it is easy to understand that those who bleed and suffer and sacrifice in its name are not willing to forego.

At the end of the eighteenth century the party of Thomas Jefferson called themselves Republicans, because they had been charged by their opponents with desiring to run to the extremes of the democratic or mob rule which had been exemplified in Paris. They therefore rejected the name of Democrats for which the father of their party had ever shown a fondness; and not till about 1805 did they begin to adopt it, and to turn an epithet into a badge of honor.

But, nowadays, the Democratic and Republican parties, finding no considerable section of citizens denouncing or deriding abstract democracy or republicanism, and being daily fed with the solid sustenance of office and power, feel no pain in differentiating between themselves and the broad doctrines which carry their label. But the Socialist party is in a less halcyon state. Struggle, defeat, and famine are its accustomed portion; and, therefore, it is comprehensible that it should highly value the intangible glories

of tradition and orthodoxy. Therefore, probably for several decades, the political party will claim the right to decree what persons and measures possess the true hall-mark; and calm discussion of socialism, in whatever way we here agree to define it, will continue to be hampered by its association, in the public mind, with a particular political party.

It remains for us to explore the boundary line between socialism and its counterpart, individualism, where we may find some unexpected *terra incognita*.

Professor T. N. Carver, in presenting his definition, says that "The ideal of socialism is not at all different from the ideal of individualism. Both are aiming at approximating nearer and nearer to equality. Socialists think this can be achieved better through public ownership and operation of the means of production. Individualists think it can be achieved better through the preservation of the institution of private property and private ownership of the means of production, though not to the entire exclusion of public ownership in some things. One is not a socialist by virtue of his belief in the public ownership of some things. . . . If one believes there are some means of production that are well adapted to public ownership and others that are better adapted to private ownership, he is not a socialist but an individualist."

More precisely, Mr. Wm. Jennings Bryan says, "Individualism is the private ownership of the means of production and distribution where competition is impossible."

Professor Frank A. Fetter holds that "the name individualist is to be applied to the person who, at any given stage of social advance doubts the efficacy of relying on the associative motives and emphasizes the importance of giving play to the emulative and competitive motives as a means of securing the activity and energy required for progress in social organization. The name socialist is to be applied to the person who, at a given moment, minimizes the importance of individualistic motives, emphasizes the need of limiting and controlling the competitive activities in society, and believes not only in the need, but in the practicability of gaining social progress by developing at that time more associative and altruistic action."

Unless our definition specifies the character of the means of production which individualism would give over to public ownership, the distinction between individualism and socialism is so

blurred as to be hardly distinguishable. If we simply affirm that individualism sanctions public ownership of some means of production and socialism the private ownership of some means of production, or that the difference between socialism and individualism is only a matter of emphasis, then the classification of a particular proposal to transfer an industry from private to public ownership is impossible. It may be an instalment of socialism or a retention of individualism.

For instance, the existing federal ownership and operation of vast irrigation works, involving the expenditure of millions of dollars, the employment of thousands of men and the creation of hundreds of farms—is that socialism or individualism? Can a measure be a piece both of individualism and socialism? Is there a wide margin between the two, belonging to neither exclusively, a sort of hinterland over which both may freely wander, neither challenging the other as trespasser?

If individualism permits the public ownership, as Mr. Bryan asserts, only of those means of production in which competition is practically impossible, the classification of measures or proposals is more easy, though socialism is then stripped of a large territory over which it had flown its flag. Municipal ownership and operation of water, lighting, and transportation plants, and state ownership of railways, telegraphs, and telephones then become embodiments of individualism—though, I imagine, Herbert Spencer and the Manchester School of economists will turn over in their graves at the news.

But, in any case, is a statesman consistent who denounces socialism over night and recommends Congress next day to establish a line of merchant vessels to be owned by the nation and operated by public officials between the Panama Isthmus and San Francisco? Is such a statesman consistent even in condemning socialism *per se*, while, as Secretary of War, he is administering a fleet of steamers, owned and operated by the nation and running between New York and Panama? Clearly, competition is not practically impossible between steamship lines. If we allow that such a sample of government enterprise is not tainted with socialist principle, where shall the boundary between socialism and individualism be staked?

Does individualism consent to the government ownership and cultivation of wide-stretching forests, with nurseries, planters, rangers, and fire wardens, with the leasing of grazing privileges, the sale and removal of ripe timber, and all the other accessories



of a great business, conducted—all by public officials—for profit? Has individualism no more objection than socialism to the continued government ownership of deposits of oil, gas, phosphate rock, and of coal beds of incalculable value, all to be held in trust for the people and worked under leases that control the methods of exploitation, the conditions of the workmen, the royalties to be paid into the public treasury, and, perhaps, the prices to be charged the consumer? Is the whole policy of the conservation of natural resources as presented by its authors an incarnation of individualism, or is it a member of the great socialist family, simply washed and dressed and adopted into a respectable household?

We have nothing to do here with the political consequences of the correct labeling of political measures. Even if we agree as economists upon definitions which will help to clear our own thought and will aid college students to be intellectually honest, we cannot enact, and we would not if we could, any pure politics law which would compel the correct and honest labeling of party proposals and protect the public from misbranded goods.

Perhaps, as Professor Henry W. Farnam suggested in his address to the Association for Labor Legislation at the Atlantic City meeting, some new term is needed to designate the policy which is neither individualistic nor socialistic, the new type which has already developed between the two old well marked species, a hybrid with characteristics derived from both parents, each of which claims it for its own, to both of which it is a beautiful child, and neither of which is willing to forego the claims of parenthood.

If a new term be adopted, New Nationalism as suggested by Mr. Croly in "The Promise of American Life", Meliorism, Insurgency, or what not, economists will be justified in asking for an exact definition of its content. If political philosophies and economic doctrines merge into each other like the colors of the rainbow, passing from revolutionary red right through to royal violet without perceptible break, then straight thinking and intellectually honest politics are hardly attainable.

Pending the presentation of such a term, acceptably defined, I see no more hopeful prospect than to disinfect the term socialism of the virulent germs with which unauthorized persons have impregnated it; and then to give socialism the same impartial, impersonal investigation to which chemists subject a new food, or a fresh carbon compound which promises an easier life for mankind.